Games I Can’t Stop Thinking About

Planet Coaster 2

I'm amazed at how lifelike graphics are these days. Swooping rollercoasters and wave pools have never looked so good. Like something straight out of a theme park brochure. PC2 is also a technical marvel, with powerful terrain editing tools and the ability to recolor, resize, rotate, and overlap “hundreds of modular pieces,” according to Leana Hafer for IGN. PC2 seems less like a game and more like a canvas for painting your wildest dreams.

Building is the heart of any good theme park sim, and PC2 knows their audience. While fans’ reaction to the management system seems lackluster, their enthusiasm for the game's sandbox mode is clear. This is where the game

says, “Go wild, kid. No limits.” You can spend hours building elegant pathways that lead people right to the hotdogs, popcorn, and light up swords. I imagine you'd wipe your brow by the end of it, like a laborer digging in the dirt. Enterprising players can build playful restrooms that match their Japanese garden park or tropical island theme. And the coasters . . .

Players start with close to 100 pre-built coasters, but if you build your own, there's tons of different track materials and types to choose from. Guests can dive, fly, loop, soar, even ride inverted or launch from multiple points. Plus, the best, tracks that drop from one to another. In addition to coasters, PC2 comes loaded with flat and tracked rides to enjoy. And if those aren't enough, there's a Steam workshop with handcrafted rides, shops, amenities, even whole parks. The game includes the best part of RCT3, watching your ride in first person for the ultimate thrill.

The best addition to PC2 are the water rides. Finally, you can relive a hot summer's day at the water park with water slides, pools, log flumes, and water coasters. As Ron Burke from GameTrend explains, “You can put in twists, turns, change the tube type (open top, closed transparent, etc.), and even put in special things like a Super Crater Bowl, Trapdoor Kamikaze, or have it just drop off into a pool.” As if that weren't enough, you can add a “fire pot, sparkle launcher, light flash, or whatever else you want to happen at a specific time.” We've never had it so good.

Planet Zoo

Planet Coaster's younger, furrier sibling. Frontier ported over their powerful terrain editor and ridiculous customization options for a good time. Over 50 realistic animals howl, climb, jump, and swim in the park of your dreams. There's a lot to love here.

In addition to adding animals, you design their enclosures. Let your capybara run under the sprinklers. Give your polar bears giant ice lollies. Build your wolves a treehouse. Why not? Detailed species pages tell you everything you need to know about an animal's needs: social

dynamics, mating preferences, size, weight, life expectancy, whether guests can enter a habitat (usually no). Even small details, like the size of male bachelor groups, or which age a species reaches sterility.

This hammers home the game's theme: that you're responsible for these creatures. They rely on you for everything, so take good care of them. There's a real conservationist message at the heart of *Planet Zoo*. Animals decline without the right enrichment, habitat, temperature, and social life. Some animals need pools, rivers, or lakes. Some need snowy pastures.

There's even a conservation rating, which gives your zoo a popularity and guest happiness bonus for breeding endangered animals, releasing them into the wild, and educating guests on these remarkable creatures. This is how you earn Conservation Credits, which help you acquire new animals. There's also an online marketplace where animals and plants are exchanged, similar to how zoos trade in real life. Depending on the mode they're in, players must balance conservation efforts with keeping the lights on, revealing the hard work zoos do every day to bring home the bacon (for the lions) without sacrificing their most meaningful work.

And let's talk about the animals. While the game started a bit lopsided, with few feathered or scaly friends, the DLC has helped fill in the gaps. There's packs for all different climates and regions: aquatic, arid, Arctic, even a twilight pack. Komodo dragons, tree frogs, penguins, alligators, fruit bats, and vipers have joined the party. Plus some excellent mammals: Clouded

leopards, lynx, sea lions, raccoons, badgers, and gibbons. These DLC also include “scenarios” and scenery pieces.

But animals remain the star of the show. *Planet Zoo* did a great job bringing them to life through art direction, movement, and sound design. Fill in your zoo, and you'll hear roars, screeches, and rumbles fill your ears. As for the animation, James Pellegrom for Soundsphere remarks, “. . . monkeys leap and swing, lions tear across their enclosures, otters glide through the water and [pygmy hippos walk] around the bottom of pools whilst . . . flamingos and cranes peck at food on the banks.” In reviews of the game, writers describe the joy of watching their animals play, swim, and live. Just like the real thing.